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READING HORIZONS

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Abstract

Literature discussion groups are a widely used practice in many classrooms. Creating literature discussions that are both effective and engaging can be a rewarding experience for both the students and the teacher. As a part of a larger study examining the scaffolding that took place during literature discussions, this article focuses on the strengths of three teachers implementing literature discussion groups within their fifth-grade classrooms. Through an analysis of these teachers' strengths, a scale was developed to help other teachers as they reflect on their own literature discussions.

Keywords: literature discussions, scaffolding, literature, upper elementary

As a literacy coach, one of my favorite aspects of literacy to support, model, and coach was literature discussion groups. As teachers in my building grew in their abilities to lead, and scaffold students into leading, I was constantly amazed at students' discussions. Every time I entered a classroom in which students were engaged in a literature discussion, I found myself sticking around a few extra minutes just to enjoy their conversations. I often wondered what it was about the students' conversations that made them so special. I pondered how teachers could make their literature discussions effective and engaging for their students. Because of these questions, I decided to conduct a study of these expert teachers to understand their unique strengths and the techniques they each used to facilitate such successful literature discussions. In this article, I provide a brief overview of literature discussion groups, discuss the study I conducted involving three fifth-grade teachers, and conclude with a scale I developed to assist classroom teachers as they reflect on literature discussion groups in their own classrooms.

Literature Discussion Groups

Literature discussion groups are a widely used practice in many classrooms. These discussions are known by many names, such as grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989), instructional conversations (Goldenberg, 1993), book clubs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994), literature circles (Daniels, 1994), and literature discussion groups (Dorn & Jones, 2012; Henderson & Dorn, 2011). Though literature discussions can take place in large-group and small-group settings, for the purposes of this study, the term *literature discussion groups* refers to groups of four to six students and a teacher who discuss a single piece of literature.

Many factors, including district expectations, curriculum requirements, and teacher preference, can contribute to the structure of literature discussion groups in a classroom. These groups can occur formally or informally, be student-led or teacher-led,

and focus on a variety of text types. Some formats follow specific procedures, while others are less structured. In these more relaxed groups, the conversations are more spontaneous, and participants are free to respond in the moment to questions, thoughts, and opinions of those in the group. Regardless of the structure, the goal of any literature discussion is to reach an understanding of the text. Comprehension, after all, is the point of reading.

Research has addressed comprehension from many different perspectives (e.g., Allington, 2009; Kintsch, 2004; McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009; Nystrand, 2006; Smith, 2012). When students are involved in literature discussions, they must be able to move beyond literal interpretation of the text to develop full understanding and make meaning. Each reader brings unique experiences to the text, which influences his comprehension (Henderson & Buskist, 2011). Because of these unique experiences, each reader must be treated as an individual, requiring teachers to know their students as learners.

According to Vygotsky (1978), the meaning-making process is the goal of all learning and understanding, and a learner's zone of proximal development is the ideal place in which to achieve this goal. Teachers who work within students' zones of proximal development can assist students in achieving this deeper level of understanding. As students interact with knowledgeable adults or others, they start to internalize the language used by the more knowledgeable individual. In a reciprocal process, the students are then able to use the language themselves to support their own thinking or the thinking of their peers.

The Study

My qualitative research study involved three fifth-grade teachers who had been implementing literature discussions for several years. The larger study specifically examined teachers' use of scaffolding techniques during literature discussions and how students, through teacher scaffolding, could internalize teacher language to then support their peers. For the purposes of this article, I focused on how these teachers ensured their literature discussion groups were effective and what kept their students engaged in the conversations. Through this in-depth analysis, I identified each teacher's strengths, and based on this careful examination of the data, I developed a scale to help other classroom teachers reflect on their own literature discussion groups.

For this study, I chose three fifth-grade teachers who I originally trained in literature discussion groups several years prior to the study, when I was their literacy coach. I selected these teachers because they were well trained and experienced with literature discussion groups. It is important to note that all discussions included in this study were from February and March of the school year. By the time these discussions took place, students had been participating in literature discussions for at least 5 months. For the duration of this study, I did not coach the teachers. In my role as a researcher, I observed and videoed each of the three teachers over a 2-month period as they engaged in literature discussions with small groups of students to examine the scaffolding used by both teachers and students during literature discussions. In Mrs. Lee's and Mrs. Tinker's (all names are pseudonyms) classrooms, I studied one literature discussion group per class. In Mrs. Sterling's class, I studied two literature discussion groups. After each literature discussion group concluded, I interviewed each teacher utilizing open-ended questions to help me understand the instructional decisions they made during the discussions. Videos and interviews were transcribed and studied to analyze patterns of conversation and to identify each teacher's strengths.

Data Analysis

As literature discussions were completed in each teacher's classroom, field notes were reviewed to develop more detailed descriptions. This process occurred after each observation to ensure information was not forgotten or misinterpreted from shorthand notes taken while in the field. After reviewing field notes, I also reviewed the videoed lessons and answers to teacher interviews.

The original coding scheme was drawn from Cervetti, Pearson, and Jaynes (2001). Initial coding was also drawn from Goldenberg's (1993) and Rueda, Goldenberg, and Gallimore's (1992) instructional conversations. These researchers analyzed discourse that took place between teachers and students and analyzed conversational moves and scaffolding that took place as teachers interacted with their students. Drawing from these sources provided a foundation for coding the conversational moves and scaffolding that took place in the fifth-grade classrooms in the study. However, although original coding schemes were drawn from these resources, not all codes were applicable to this study and some additional codes were necessary. After one round of coding, a revised set of codes was developed that better fit the data that had been gathered to provide a clearer picture of what took place in the literature discussions. Coding then began again to produce a refined set of data.

In addition to coding videoed lessons, data from interviews were also coded. Deductive coding schemes for interviews were drawn from Goldenberg (1993) and Rueda et al. (1992); however, inductive coding schemes were also developed based on the information that was gathered. Coding for student work samples was drawn from Dorn and Jones (2012) and Dorn and Soffos (2005). Videoed lessons were cross-referenced with field notes, interviews, and preliminary notes of videoed lessons to triangulate the data.

Data gathered from videoed lessons and interviews were analyzed in a cross-case analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This process allowed patterns to be identified and connections within categories to be made (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). It also allowed differences to be recognized that influenced the effectiveness of the literature discussions. Using cross-case analysis, patterns that were common to each of the teachers were analyzed. Although generalization is not typically the goal of qualitative research, determining scaffolding techniques that are effective across the teachers within this study helped determine whether results could be reasonable beyond the individual teachers (Miles et al., 2014).

Overview of Discussions

At the time of the study, each teacher was using a different type of text during the literature discussion groups. For the groups being studied, one teacher used the fiction text *Esperanza Rising* (Muñoz Ryan, 2000), one teacher used the graphic novel *Amulet: The Stonekeeper* (Kibuishi, 2008), and one teacher used two historical autobiographies, *The Girl Who Survived: A True Story of the Holocaust* (Brandman & Bierman, 2010) and *The Hidden Girl: A True Story of the Holocaust* (Kaufman & Metzger, 2008). See Table 1 for a summary of these texts. Though each teacher used a different type of text, many commonalities existed in their literature discussions.

Table 1
Texts Used for Literature Discussions

Text	Synopsis
Amulet: The Stonekeeper (Kibuishi, 2008)	After their father's death, Emily, her brother Navin, and their mother move to their great-grandfather's home, which has been abandoned since his disappearance many years ago. Soon after their arrival, the family is swept away to an alternate dimension and danger ensues. Emily is chosen to be a stonekeeper and must learn to harness the power of an amulet she now wears around her neck. With the help of some new friends, Emily and Navin fight to save their mother from a dangerous creature. (Note: This graphic novel is the first in a series.)
Esperanza Rising (Muñoz Ryan, 2000)	Esperanza is used to living a privileged life. After her father's death, she and her mother must leave Mexico and begin a new life at a Mexican work camp in California. Esperanza must adjust to new living conditions and accept a new way of life. When her mother falls ill, Esperanza faces more struggles and must learn to rise above the challenges to find happiness once again.
The Girl Who Survived: A True Story of the Holocaust (Brandman & Bierman, 2010)	This autobiography details the horrors that young Bronia faces during the Holocaust. Tragedy strikes when her parents and brother are taken in a roundup and Bronia and her sisters are sent to Auschwitz. Enduring many hardships in the concentration camp, Bronia makes it out alive and becomes one of the youngest Auschwitz survivors.
The Hidden Girl: A True Story of the Holocaust (Kaufman & Metzger, 2008	In this autobiography, Lola shares her story of survival during the Holocaust. After her mother was shot and killed when Lola was 8 years old, Lola was sent into hiding by her grandmother. Lola moves from place to place to avoid being captured by the Nazis, living in one place for 9 months in a hole under a barn. The book details her struggles and her ability to overcome and begin a new life.

During discussions, students worked together with each other and the teacher to make meaning and comprehend the story. The meaning the students created was achieved through the scaffolded support of a more knowledgeable individual, occasionally another student, though more often a teacher. Though the literature discussions had many commonalities, each of the teachers being studied had unique strengths, which were revealed during qualitative analysis. Therefore, in the following sections, each one is presented individually to highlight these strengths.

Mrs. Lee

Mrs. Lee was a third-year teacher who had been implementing literature discussion groups for 3 years. Her literature discussion group read the graphic novel *Amulet* (Kibuishi, 2008). This text was unique because it was the first graphic novel the students had read and the first graphic novel the teacher had used for literature discussion groups. Mrs. Lee had researched strategies to implement graphic novels effectively and was excited to be using it with the group during the study.

The group was a mixed-ability group and included advanced, average, and below-average readers, including one student who received special education services for academic support. The students participating in the group came to the table excited each

time I was present for the discussion. They were always eager to discuss the assigned reading. Mrs. Lee was comfortable with allowing her students to lead the discussion. Her classroom management skills were impeccable, and she built a strong relationship with her students that carried over to her literature discussions. Through data analysis, the strengths of Mrs. Lee's discussions were revealed and characterized in three ways: (1) the teacher's gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), (2) the dialogic discussions, and (3) the student-to-student scaffolding.

Gradual release of responsibility. In Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) gradual release of responsibility model, the teacher or more knowledgeable individual begins with a high degree of support and gradually releases responsibility to the learner as the learner becomes more independent. Graphic novels are different than traditional novels. Reading a graphic novel requires the reader to look far beyond the printed text or words and read the pictures. The placement of pictures, the size, and the color contrast are all intentional and all symbolic (Rudiger, 2006). In a traditional novel, the author describes in detail the characters, setting, and events in a story. In a graphic novel, however, the reader must focus on much more than the words. In the following excerpt (3-2-15), Mrs. Lee questioned her students (all names are pseudonyms) about the differences between the graphic novel they were reading and other books they had read.

> **Mrs. Lee:** OK, but so how is this different than the typical book that you would read?
>
> **David:** Because it's showing you the expression that somebody's getting instead of like saying like...
>
> **Evan:** Because in books, it explains it in words because...but this is all just dialogue. You, they have to put all what the character going on, what's going on with the character in like their facial expressions. Eye movements and stuff like that.
>
> **Mrs. Lee:** So do we really have to pay attention to the facial expressions to be able to understand the story?
>
> **Todd:** Yeah.
> (David and Evan nod heads.)
>
> **Sara:** I can just tell, it's really like the pictures are half of the story, so it, so it, it helps tell the story when you look at the pictures and you see their facial expressions, it adds almost like, if it was in a book, it adds almost another page, it's like half of the book. Pretty much.
>
> **Mrs. Lee:** Yeah, it's paying attention to what the characters are doing and how they're feeling, since that information's, normally, the author tells it to us, but you guys are having to infer.

Mrs. Lee started with a high degree of support for her students as they learned to navigate the graphic novel. In the first literature discussion, she directed students to look at the pictures in the texts. However, as students learned how to interpret the text on their own, Mrs. Lee could turn the discussion over to her students. The first group (2-2-15) was characterized by many unplanned teacher questions designed to ensure students understood how to "read" the pictures, not just the words. Mrs. Lee asked several questions throughout the discussion that helped students analyze what was happening in the pictures. The following examples illustrate her questioning language (excerpts are noted with the date from the original transcript):

2-2-15: But let's analyze this picture and let's look at this one [pointing to text]. Is it facing towards her or is it facing away from her?

2-2-15: But does it look like it's doing anything to her?

2-2-15: OK, so and let's analyze then 'cause we've said that he keeps sneaking or he's following them. OK, so right here again [pointing to text], what is he doing?

2-2-15: He's spying on them. And then look at this frame right here [pointing to text]. What do you think is happening right here?

In each question, Mrs. Lee directed student attention back to the text to scaffold them into interpreting the pictures. In subsequent discussions, which took place a month or more after the initial videoed discussions, students began to internalize the teacher's language and refer each other to the pictures in the text to add to the discussion. The following statements, made by students rather than the teacher, were taken from transcripts of subsequent literature discussions (3-2-15 and 3-4-15), which were videoed approximately one month after the first literature discussion:

3-2-15: I was also gonna say she looks really, really awake in that one [pointing to picture in text] because her eyes are just "boom!"

3-2-15: Also about that, it looks like he's having an "aha" moment. Like, "Oh, you've got to be kidding me!"

3-4-15: Look at Grandpa's eyes. See how they're narrowing down [pointing to picture in text]?

3-4-15: You can tell it's a trap because look at his face [pointing to picture in text], it's like [makes a creepy face].

As students became more adept at reading and interpreting the graphic novel, the teacher could withdraw some of her support and place more responsibility on the students in accordance with Pearson and Gallagher's (1983) gradual release of responsibility model. Students were then able to independently refer to the pictures to support their own learning.

Dialogic discussion. Billings and Fitzgerald (2002) described three distinct characteristics of dialogic discussions: (1) shared power between teachers and students as to the topics or information to discuss, (2) the teacher not being viewed as an omniscient authority, and (3) relinquished teacher control over content and format of discussions. All three of these characteristics were present during Mrs. Lee's literature discussion groups.

Mrs. Lee's group featured a shared give-and-take atmosphere in which both she and her students participated in the discussion and shared responsibility for topics and information being discussed. Mrs. Lee was comfortable letting her students lead the discussion and allowing them to choose which parts of the text were talked about throughout the conversations. Students in Mrs. Lee's group did not raise their hands for permission to speak; rather, they interacted naturally with each other as they would in a personal conversation. They agreed with each other at times, but were also comfortable disagreeing with each other. Mrs. Lee's students did not appear to view her as an omniscient, all-knowing authority. In addition, Mrs. Lee reserved her opinion of the text, which allowed her students to form their own opinions and ensured that they did not rely on her for the "right" answer.

Nystrand (2006) posited that preplanned questions undermined the principles of dialogic classrooms. As stated in her interviews, Mrs. Lee rarely came to the discussion with preplanned questions. During her interview after the first discussion group, Mrs. Lee stated, "I normally come with just one to two questions and they come with discussion points, and then I field based on what they say." Because she did not come to the table with a list of preplanned questions, Mrs. Lee was able to respond to student needs and scaffold them individually. This quality also added to the dialogic nature of the group.

Student-to-student scaffolding. Mrs. Lee structured her group to be student-led, which allowed students to build on one another's comments, which is one way they scaffolded and supported each other. Students in Mrs. Lee's literature discussion could hold sustained conversations with little teacher input. Mrs. Lee was often observed sitting back and observing while students held the conversation, agreeing, and disagreeing with each other as well as asking and answering each other's questions.

Students were also comfortable speculating on possible answers or theories as to what was happening in the story by scaffolding for each other. Because the students were new at reading a graphic novel, they had to learn how to interpret more than just the words. They had to learn how to interpret the pictures, and one "right" answer was not always clear or even necessary. Students had to work together to infer the author's intentions and the underlying meaning of the story. In addition, students had to combine their interpretations of the pictures and the words, with peer support, to put all the pieces together.

Students in Mrs. Lee's literature discussions often posed deep-level discussion questions to the group to spark conversation. For example, various students asked the following questions, which they had planned and written in their response logs: How do you think Emily feels when the Amulet goes off? Will their mom be safe? Like, do you think she's going to be OK? Do you think they will get there in time to save their mom?

Although it is possible the students would have asked these types of question regardless of the teacher's presence, it is unlikely. It is more likely that questions like these were asked because students had heard the teacher ask similar discussion questions. By modeling questioning techniques to deepen student understanding, her students were then able to scaffold each other with similar types of questions.

Mrs. Tinker

Mrs. Tinker, in her 20th year of teaching, had been implementing literature discussion groups in her classroom for 5 years. Mrs. Tinker established a relaxed, laid-back environment in her classroom that allowed her students to feel at home and cared for during their learning. She incorporated numerous subjects into project-based activities in which her students could integrate their knowledge of different topics and deepen their understanding. Mrs. Tinker's quiet manner allowed students to share their opinions without fear of judgement or reproach.

Her group read the novel Esperanza Rising (Muñoz Ryan, 2000). Students were grouped homogeneously by reading level. All students in each group were actively engaged in the conversations and appeared to really enjoy the book. Mrs. Tinker's literature discussion groups were characterized in three ways: (1) teacher as a participant, (2) students' ability to cite text evidence, and (3) deep levels of understanding.

Teacher as participant. Mrs. Tinker was as much at ease with her students as they were with her. She appeared to be more of a participant in the group, rather than an authority figure. The students interacted with her as almost an equal. During discussions,

Mrs. Tinker sat back in a relaxed manner and participated in the discussion with the students, rather than led.

During discussions, students chose parts of the text they wanted to discuss, had questions about, or connected with in some way. Mrs. Tinker appeared to be comfortable letting the students lead the discussion. During post-lesson interviews, Mrs. Tinker shared that almost all discussion questions were unplanned. This allowed her to engage more as a participant than as a leader. She occasionally preplanned questions to help students predict what would happen in the following day's reading, but most of her questions centered on responding to the topics presented by the students. Mrs. Tinker helped scaffold students' thinking by reinforcing topics or parts of the text they had chosen to discuss and aiding students in thinking beyond the text, to deeper levels of understanding. In the following excerpt (2-11-15), Mrs. Tinker responded naturally and questioned students as they easily wove through the conversation. In this excerpt, the students were discussing a scene in which Esperanza and her mother were having a conversation before bedtime.

> **Mrs. Tinker:** Mmm hmm. So it was part of their nighttime ritual, wasn't it? This is what they do each time before they go to bed. So she was saying—what do you think about that? That her mom was praying for her? That, that [reading from text] "You can be strong no matter what happens."
>
> **Thomas:** So like if you get picked on, or if you get bullied, you're stronger, and you're strong enough and you don't have to fight back and you can just go tell someone else.
>
> **Mrs. Tinker:** Mmm hmm, yeah, if she has trouble with other people. Erica?
>
> **Erica:** Maybe it's part of, maybe Mama knows about Marta and everything going on with the bullying—
>
> **Mrs. Tinker:** Yeah, it could be.
>
> **Erica:** And she's waiting for Esperanza to get stronger, to solve the problem, like problem-solve herself.
>
> **Mrs. Tinker:** Right, but "You can be strong no matter what happens." Beth, what does it make you think?
>
> **Beth:** Maybe Mama isn't so confident anymore, as—well, isn't as confident as Esperanza thinks when Abu—, Abu—
>
> **Mallory:** Abuela.
>
> **Beth:** Yeah, when she gets back and brings all the money and they're going to be rich again and Mama already knows that's not going to happen.
>
> **Mrs. Tinker:** Yeah.
>
> **Beth:** And maybe she's like, no matter what happens, you can still be strong even if things—
>
> **Mrs. Tinker:** Right, so she's trying to let her know that, you know, things may not get better for a while and you've got to be strong no matter what's coming in the future. [Students nod heads in agreement.] Maybe it's like a hint, isn't it? That something's coming.

Citing text evidence. Mrs. Tinker's students cited text evidence frequently. Each time students were ready to move the conversation in a different direction, they each referenced a specific piece of text to guide the discussion. This proved to be an effective

and efficient way to move throughout the chapters and keep the conversation going.

In the following examples, different students cited specific pages in the text as they referenced points they wanted to use as they guided the conversation:

> **3-3-15:** And on 159, Mama asked for Abuelita's blanket, so she's like, it kind of gave you a hint that she is missing Abuelita and she needs her to take care of Esperanza too and herself.
>
> **3-3-15:** On 161, it was when Esperanza was finishing the blanket, and she was putting her wishes into it, and she was—that's probably not the wish that she thought she would be putting into the blanket when she was finishing it.

Although students did not always reference page numbers when citing text evidence throughout the conversation, when they moved the discussion in a different direction, they typically mentioned the page number so the rest of the group could follow along. Citing text evidence enabled students to move through the text, touching on various parts that stood out to them or ones they had questions about. At times, though, it appeared that students were more concerned about getting through the text, rather than developing deep understanding. Consequently, Mrs. Tinker often had to slow down the discussion for them to ponder parts of the text that were central to the story's theme.

Deep levels of understanding. All groups that were studied could achieve deep levels of understanding, and Mrs. Tinker's group was no exception. For the purposes of this study, deep understanding is defined as understanding that goes beyond basic recall. Deep understanding requires students to move beyond literal interpretation of the text, integrating background knowledge with the author's intended message to understand multiple meanings of the text (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). Students in these groups could do more than recall basic facts or events from the text. Combining their own background knowledge with the author's words, the students made meaning of the texts. The students who participated in her literature discussions could think at deep levels and understand big ideas or layers of meaning well, both independently and with teacher support.

Through scaffolding and support from the teacher and their peers, students in Mrs. Tinker's group made sense of the text and achieved deep levels of understanding. In the following examples, students demonstrated their abilities to think beyond the words on the page:

> **2-5-15:** I'm kind of thinking, well, Miguel is trying to help her and stuff, but I think he's trying to show that it doesn't matter what it looks on the outside; it matters what's on the inside.
>
> **2-11-15:** Well, maybe she started off the opposite of Esperanza and she was nice and sweet until her dad died and then she became a mean, selfish girl, unlike Esperanza who was selfish in the first place and is now changing.
>
> In these examples, students connected their own knowledge with the author's words to infer and achieve meaning beyond surface understanding.

Mrs. Sterling

Mrs. Sterling, a 26-year veteran teacher, had been implementing literature discussion groups in her classroom for 5 years. In her class, two groups, both homogeneously grouped by reading level, were studied. One group read *The Girl Who Survived: A True Story of the Holocaust* (Bierman & Brandman, 2010), while one group read *The Hidden Girl: A True Story of the Holocaust* (Kaufman & Metzger, 2008). Both texts are nonfiction

autobiographies about survivors of the Holocaust. Because they were reading the same type of text, the two groups were similar in nature.

Both groups demonstrated an excitement for the story, as was evident by their cheers of Yesssss! when their group was called to the table. Often, Mrs. Sterling had to calm the group down as they got seated because each student was so eager to share and start the discussion. Mrs. Sterling was as excited as the students to share these stories. She had used both texts for the past several years with her literature discussion groups as a part of a unit she taught on the Holocaust. The strengths of Mrs. Sterling's groups were characterized in three ways: (1) students' ability to relate the stories to real-life and personal connections students had to the stories, (2) authentic questions students posed, and (3) students' ability to agree and disagree with each other.

Relating to real-life and personal connections. Because the events in the stories Mrs. Sterling's students were reading were factual in nature, the students had many personal connections as they tried to place themselves in the authors' shoes and understand how life in Nazi Germany must have felt during the war.

Based on information gathered during interviews, Mrs. Sterling rarely asked a preplanned question. She did, however, ask many unplanned deep-thinking questions that helped students connect the story to real life. Through this line of questioning, students made many personal connections or talked about how the story affected them emotionally. During one discussion, Mrs. Sterling asked, "What would you do if you went home tonight and the police showed up at your house and said, 'Just because you are *this*, your house is gone. You leave'?" (2-10-15). In another discussion, she asked, "Can you imagine, though, a life where you have to protect a bowl?" (3-3-15), referring to the bowl given to inmates at the concentration camps. Both questions prompted a great deal of discussion and helped the students relate the events of the story to real life.

During one discussion of *The Girl Who Survived* (Bierman & Brandman, 2010), the group discussed a part in the text in which the main character, Bronia, was standing with her siblings in a concentration camp and the inmates were being divided into two lines. Unbeknownst to Bronia, one line would end up staying alive and the other line would end up in the gas chambers. Bronia made a split-second decision to jump from the line she was in with two of her siblings to the other line, which meant that she survived, and her siblings were sent to the gas chambers. The discussion of this portion of the text led to some powerful connections by the students and some deep levels of questioning by Mrs. Sterling. At one point, she stated, "I wonder if Bronia knew, because at the time she was standing in the line and the hand was swinging right or the hand was swinging left—one meaning life, one meaning death. I wonder if she knew what it was going to be like if she would have stayed with her sisters. What do you think?" The following conversation ensued:

> **Tiffany:** Well, she knew, well, I—it said somewhere in the book, it, um, she did know that one way was life and one way was death. So I bet she really did know that, um, where Mila was, she would have survived because, um, I bet she knew that younger people couldn't work so they were in the line for the "showers."
>
> **Mrs. Sterling:** Which is where she was at.
>
> **Tiffany:** Yeah.
>
> **Mrs. Sterling:** And she jumped out.

Tiffany: Yeah, and she was in the younger line.

Mrs. Sterling: Yeah, so what I'm asking, though, is if she had a forethought to know what life was going to be like on the inside, do you think she would have stayed in her line?

Breanna: Heck yeah.

Mrs. Sterling: Choosing—why do you say that?

Breanna: Because I could—if she could like see in the future, she would see all like the pain and stuff, she would be like, "Yeah, I'll go to this line."

Mrs. Sterling: OK, what about you? What do you think? (Directed at whole group.) Take this personal. Now, you just read a whole chapter of Auschwitz. You read a whole chapter of what she went through, her and her sisters. And we're not even to the end yet, so that was just part. What's, what's your feelings on this?

Mariah: Earlier in the book it showed she, like, really stood up for her religion and really was very bold, so I think that she, she like knew a little bit what was gonna happen, but she still wanted to like show the Nazis that they, they're gonna survive.

Mrs. Sterling: What would you do?

Mariah: I would probably go with my in—to the other, to the oth—I would choose to survive.

Mrs. Sterling: You would choose to survive?

Mariah: Because like it's just [pause] live [pause] just, I know you would suffer through all the pain, but having the chance to live—

Chandler: Yeah.

Mariah: Is. Everything.

At this point, students were visibly moved. They could be seen seriously considering the question "What would you do?" It was difficult for some of them to come up with an answer, stumbling over their words while they spoke, while others answered quickly, knowing exactly the choice they would make.

Tiffany: I probably would have gone to the other line, because just think about going in a dark cellar, with fake soap, and fake shower heads, and ehh [makes choking noise and puts hands up to throat], you know, like just stopping, and you couldn't even, like I couldn't even imagine going through that. Well, what my life is, like I have a fabulous life, but seriously. Like, I—my mind can't comprehend it.

Mrs. Sterling: So you still feel you probably would have done the same thing of jumping the line?

Tiffany: Yeah.

Mrs. Sterling: OK, Wesley? What do you think you would have done?

Wesley: I would have jumped the line, but I would have my sisters, or my little siblings jump with me, real quick, cause like there's so much to live for. If you survive, you can live your life.

Mrs. Sterling: Even if you're only getting 300 calories a day?

Wesley: I would. I would work my hardest and do whatever I could.

Because the stories were drawn from real-life events, the students connected with them personally. And because the stories were told from the perspective of a child near their own age, the students were even more moved. They often had a difficult time comprehending how a child their own age could endure such atrocities and survive.

In Rosenblatt's (2004) discussion of the efferent and aesthetic stance, readers take an efferent stance when reading for information and an aesthetic stance when reading for emotion and deeper meaning. Karolides (1997) suggested that reading is often a combination of the two. In the case of Mrs. Sterling's readers, this is certainly true. Students were learning about historical events that took place during the Holocaust, but because the stories were told from the perspective of a child near their own age, they were also moved by the reading and affected emotionally. Although both efferent and aesthetic responses would most likely still occur to some degree if students were reading the book independently, the scaffolding that the teacher did and the conversation that they shared with each other certainly contributed to their understanding and helped them do more than just read the story—it helped them feel it.

Authentic questions. Both of Mrs. Sterling's discussion groups asked numerous *authentic questions* during their conversations about their texts. For the purposes of this study, authentic questions are defined as sincere questions that students asked for which they did not have an answer. Students asked these questions because they truly wanted to know the answer. During the discussions, the teacher or students brought up topics that made the students stop and wonder. Some of their questions had answers. Some did not.

The questions the students asked were not simply surface-level questions that could be found directly in the text. Their questions went much deeper. For example, while discussing *The Girl Who Survived* (Bierman & Brandman, 2010), students asked the following authentic questions.

2-10-15: Um, well, I just thought of this. What if the—I'm not saying that this happened—but what if the Germans smuggled? What would they...what would the Germans do?

3-17-15: How could you live with that guilt, you know [referring to the previously discussed instance of the split-second decision Bronia made to switch lines]?

As with *The Girl Who Survived* (Bierman & Brandman, 2010), while discussing *The Hidden Girl* (Kaufman & Metzger, 2008), students also asked authentic questions. Both texts affected students aesthetically, which in turn made them question. The following authentic questions were asked during discussions about *The Hidden Girl*:

2-27-15: I was thinking. Do you think that if the grandmother knew that she was going to die, she would still stay behind and only let Lola go, or like, um like go with Lola?

2-27-15: One reason I was very surprised in this chapter is because like I know people gave her food, but why didn't they take her in when they knew that she was begging?

Authentic questions occurred in Mrs. Sterling's literature discussion groups at a rate that was approximately triple the rate of the other two classrooms being studied. The higher rate of authentic questions could be attributed to the content of the books being

discussed and the way the stories impacted the students on a personal level. It was evident from the discussion that the students often had a hard time comprehending that something as horrific as the Holocaust could occur, which led to many questions related to choices that the people in the text made.

The high rate of authentic questioning that took place in Mrs. Sterling's literature discussions could also be attributed to the scaffolding that occurred during the conversations. As discussed in the previous section, Mrs. Sterling asked deep-level questions that assisted students in relating the story to real life, but she also encouraged students to question. In the discussion about *The Hidden Girl* (Kaufman & Metzger, 2008), Mrs. Sterling prompted students with the following question:

> **2-27-15:** If we had Lola here right now, what would be one question that you would ask her? Think for a minute. Everything we know about our character. Everything she's went through so far. What would be the one thing?….You could only ask her one question.

After several students had shared their thoughts, one final student, after much serious consideration, answered in a way that demonstrated her ability to think at levels that went beyond the surface of the text.

> **Katherine:** Ohhh [thinking hard, biting lip], um, you—did you—ever have—did you ever think about God through this?
>
> **Mrs. Sterling:** OK, what do you mean? Explain a little about that.
>
> **Katherine:** Because her religion was a Jew and she loves God, but through all this, she didn't say anything about God.
>
> **Wayne:** Yeah, that's true.
>
> **Katherine:** But she did talk about everything else. So did you ever think about God? Did you ever pray during this time?

It is possible, though not likely, that this level of thinking would have occurred without teacher support or discussion among peers. Authentic questions positively impacted the discussion that took place during these groups.

Agreeing and disagreeing. Another strength of Mrs. Sterling's literature discussion groups was the way that the students scaffolded each other through agreeing and disagreeing. Although the agreements helped reinforce students' thinking, the disagreements helped students consider a perspective other than their own. In this manner, students could reflect more about the text, but they were also able to learn an important life skill—that disagreements and debates can occur in a respectful manner. The agreements and disagreements that took place did not occur without a great deal of support and modeling at the beginning, though. When introducing literature discussions to her students, Mrs. Sterling demonstrated how to support agreements with text evidence or reasoning. She also taught students how to respectfully disagree with their peers.

In the following transcript excerpts, students interacted with each other, including some agreement and disagreement, demonstrating their ability to hold respectful conversations after much practice, with little teacher intervention. Mrs. Sterling intervened only once in the conversation to prompt the students to elaborate on their points. Other than one prompt from the teacher, the students conversed with each other regarding choices of the characters in the story.

In the first excerpt (2-10-15), the students discussed the adults' decision to send a small child out to smuggle food rather than to smuggle it themselves. Some of the students had a difficult time understanding this choice and disagreed with the parents' choice, while others agreed with it.

Tiffany: Um, that they sent like a child to go smuggle their food! Like, and she could have gotten killed! But that was how—

Chandler: That was a good idea.

Mrs. Sterling: [gesturing to Chandler] That was a good idea?

Chandler: I thought it was a—they thought it was a good idea.

Mrs. Sterling: Why? Why did you think it was a good idea?

Chandler: 'Cause it said she was small and had self-confidence.

Mrs. Sterling: OK.

Anthony: And once again going back to that she didn't look in particular like a Jew, it made her easy to fit in with all of the other people.

Mrs. Sterling: Mmm hmm.

Tiffany: But I understand, like when I'm an adult and I have kids, I know that I'll love my kids more than anything. I wouldn't—like if there was a chance of my kid getting killed, I would not take it.

In a later discussion (3-3-15), the students again discussed the choice of Bronia, the narrator, to switch lines and abandon her siblings. While some students agreed with Bronia's choice, several disagreed.

Chandler: She just, she just left them there!

Wesley: It's terrible.

Anthony: She abandoned them! Literally! She didn't even make a plan. She just went for it!

Chandler: She abandoned them.

Anthony: I would have at least said, "OK, come with me!" And pulled them over!

Chandler: Yeah!

Wesley: Just like her, just like her mom said, "Run!"

Breanna: But the soldier also, the soldier beat her!

Anthony: But just leave your sisters to die!

The students were quick to judge the decision of the main character. The teacher understood that the students had a difficult time understanding the circumstances that led to Bronia's decision to abandon her siblings. She interjected to help the students think deeper and reflect on reasons Bronia might have made her choice.

Mrs. Sterling: Why do you think she did that?

Anthony: I wouldn't have done that.

Mariah: It's instincts. That was like, like if you were getting ready to be killed and it was you or the other person, you would just be—go—do that other person, just—

Chandler: But—

Tiffany: Yeah. Afterwards you would be like, "Oh my gosh, what'd I do?" But at that moment, would you really want to be killed?

Chandler: No. And then you think back to it and you're like, you know, whatever.

Anthony: I wouldn't. I would, I would, I would not have done the same thing that she did.

Chandler: Exactly.

As students continued to discuss the character's choice to switch lines, the conversation moved to a discussion of her reaction to her choice. As students shared the following thoughts, they demonstrated that they felt safe enough in their group that they were comfortable disagreeing with the teacher:

Anthony: She didn't really have a reaction.

Chandler: She didn't—yeah.

Anthony: She didn't have a reaction.

Chandler: But it did say that she, it did say [flipping through book]—

Mrs. Sterling: She did have a little bit of a reaction.

Anthony: Not like you would think. Like you just left your sisters to die, you'd be so balled up. She didn't really have that reaction. She was just like "Oh, OK."

Tiffany: I was confused, because like it, uh, when they were laying in the bed, like I would have thought, if I was in that situation, I—I wouldn't have never been able to lay on a bed. I would have been so horrified at what I actually did. I would just—and then I would have to think about my sisters and what they're going through right now and how I'm just laying on a bed.

In both excerpts, the teacher provided minimal support for students. Instead, the students agreed and disagreed with each other, as well as the teacher, which is one way that the students provided their peers with a scaffold to deepen and challenge the thinking of others.

Summary and a Scale

Each teacher who participated in this study had different strengths, yet each participated in or led literature discussions that facilitated a deeper understanding of the text. An analysis of each teacher's strengths reveals that there is no set script that can lead to effective discussions. Rather, it takes a thoughtful teacher who is willing to gradually release responsibility for the discussions to the students and intervene only when necessary to guide understanding. The teachers in this study were more participants than leaders of their groups and encouraged students to scaffold each other. By relating the texts to real life and citing text evidence, the fifth graders could make meaning of the text that went beyond a basic recall of facts. The students were also able to combine what they knew with what the author told them to create meaning. Because the teachers were participants rather than leaders, the students often noticed parts in or made connections with the text that the teachers had not expected. This led to some powerful discussions.

As previously stated, it is important to note that at the time of this study, students had been participating in literature discussion groups in their classroom for 5 months. During these 5 months, the teachers modeled, scaffolded, and supported the students to

help them reach the levels of performance featured in the transcripts in this article. The conversations in the sample transcripts in this article show that students could achieve independence through much teacher scaffolding that took place during the duration of the school year. Though teacher scaffolding still took place, much more modeling took place at the beginning of the school year.

This study focused on scaffolding within literature discussions. Analyzing each teacher's strengths and the strengths of her students as they scaffolded each other assisted me in developing a scale to help teachers reflect on their own literature discussions. Table 2 presents a scale that educators can use as they analyze their own literature discussions. Though some of the categories in the scale relate to the types of discussions that were held (e.g., teacher-led vs. student-led, monologic vs. dialogic), some of the categories relate to the characteristics of the group (e.g., teacher controlling turn-taking vs. students conversing naturally, teachers answering questions vs. students answering questions).

Table 2
Literature Discussion Scale

On a scale of 1–5, please rate yourself on the following.				
Teacher-led				Student-led
1	2	3	4	5
Teacher answers questions				Students answer questions
1	2	3	4	5
Teacher calls on students (with hands raised)				Students converse naturally (without raising hands to speak)
1	2	3	4	5
Monologic				Dialogic
1	2	3	4	5
Surface-level (basic recall) questions				Deep level questions
1	2	3	4	5
Students look at the teacher				Students look at each other
1	2	3	4	5
Teacher opinions				Student opinions
1	2	3	4	5
Teacher leader				Teacher participant
1	2	3	4	5
Teacher scaffolding only				Student-to-student scaffolding
1	2	3	4	5
Student excitement/ engagement low				Student excitement/ engagement high
1	2	3	4	5

The scale was developed using conversations from teachers and students who discussed a traditional novel, two autobiographical texts, and a graphic novel. Because the scale was developed from three different types of texts, the characteristics are generic enough to be used to gauge the discussion of a range of text types.

For teachers, reflection is important. The rating scale is not meant to be an evaluation for what constitutes an effective literature discussion; rather, it is presented as a practical tool to assist teachers as they reflect on their own practices. For those in a literacy coach position, the scale could be a conversation starter to help teachers see areas of strength and areas needing improvement in their literature discussions. The conversation could be a springboard for further coaching cycles or support that the literacy coach could provide.

Final Thoughts

I often think that I learned as much from teachers and their students during my time as a literacy coach as they did from me. Though I supported teachers' implementation of literature discussion groups in their classrooms, they were the ones who worked with the students daily and could take student understandings to deeper levels. The strengths these teachers possessed enabled each of them to hold effective and engaging literature discussions with students. Through this study, I learned that though there is certainly no perfect discussion, every discussion had moments of magic. Over the course of the study, I laughed, experienced goosebumps, and was moved to tears. And I wasn't the only one—the teachers and students did too. Discussions do not have to be perfect to be effective and engaging. These teachers demonstrated that by relinquishing some control and allowing students to lead the conversation, the conversations that were held were powerful and led to a deeper understanding of the texts being discussed.

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